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Posted on Sat, Oct. 04, 2008

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Ky liquor retailer resumes local wine purchases

The Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, KY. -- A large liquor retailer in Kentucky will resume purchases from some wineries in the state after people complained and a union threatened a boycott.

Roger Leasor, president of Liquor Barn, which has stores in Louisville and Lexington, said on Tuesday he planned to stop making purchases at a handful of wineries because they support wine sales at grocery stores. Leasor had said buying from those wineries would paying them to promote competition with Liquor Barn.

Kentucky doesn't allow wine to be sold in food stores, but Food with Wine Coalition consultant Luke Schmidt said a bill to change that is in the works. A similar bill supported by grocers during the last legislative session died in committee.

Leasor and other package retailers oppose the change because they say it would hurt their sales.

After Leasor's announcement, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 227, a 19,000-member Kentucky grocery and food processing union, threatened a boycott of Liquor Barn unless the retailer agreed to resume buying certain Kentucky wines again.

Leasor told The Courier-Journal on Thursday that he changed his mind after he got several responses about his announcement. He said the reversal resulted from internal discussions and said, "I'm not going to fight with my neighbors."

Leasor said his company has supported Kentucky growers' efforts for 15 years to build a wine industry.

"We want to live in wine country," he said. "We think it's a terrible shame that the grocers are using our little, tiny wine industry to further their legislative aims. And that's how we see it. I understand that other people see it differently."

Liquor Barn purchases products from more than a dozen wineries in the state.

Major grocery chains in the state, including Kroger Co., support the effort to legalize wine sales at grocery stores.

Schmidt said details are still being worked out, but the coalition hopes to introduce a bill early next year.

Curtis Sigretto, owner of Elk Creek Vineyards in Owen County, initially called Liquor Barn's decision to stop purchases disappointing, especially since Leasor is a member of the Kentucky Grape and Wine Council, which promotes the wine industry.

Springhill Winery owner Eddie O'Daniel said Leasor's reversal was "amazing."

He said that the Liquor Barn bought about 1,000 cases over the last five years. O'Daniel said he appreciates the Liquor Barn business, but still wants to be able to sell his product in groceries.

"We have to expand our market in the food stores only because we need to grow our market for all the Kentucky farmers" growing grapes, O'Daniel said.

Information from: The Courier-Journal, <http://www.courier-journal.com>




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